# Russia and the Great War

Russia entered the war bound by treaty to Serbia, upon whom war had been declared by Austria-Hungary. Russia announced the mobilization of her troops, a process that was estimated to take around six weeks. Germany viewed the mobilization of the Russian army as a direct threat to their territory and declared war on Russia. Other ulterior motives for Russia’s decision to join the war include nationalistic aims, territorial expansion and regain of honour after the defeat in the Russo-Japanese war. By inducing nationalistic fervour in the Russian people, the Tsar felt that he could distract them from the internal problems of the country and thus curb the continuing uprisings after the revolution of 1905.

At the start of the war, the people were intoxicated by the nationalistic fervour and propaganda. They rallied around Tsar Nicholas II, providing support to their government at last. Formal opposition all but disappeared, and even the striking workers were caught up by the war enthusiasm. However, the people had been informed that the war would be over by Christmas, which of course did not happen. Despite initial successes against the Austrians in Galicia, the Russian army was poorly-led and under-equipped and soon suffered horrifying casualties. At the Battle of Tannenburg, General Samsonov’s troops were surrounded by German regiments, and only 10,000 of the 150,000 Russian soldiers escaped alive. Russia’s attempted invasion of Prussia failed miserably, costing them the loss of over 250,000 soldiers.

By December 1914, the Russian government was sending untrained and unarmed soldiers to the war front. In 1915, the Russian army suffered over 2 million casualties and lost a great deal of territory—much of Belorussia, Lithuania and Kurland were surrendered to the German army. The war caused agricultural production to decrease rapidly, creating food shortages in most parts of Russia. Meanwhile, Lenin (in exile in Switzerland) called imperialism the highest form of capitalism and proposed to turn the war into a civil war. Along with Zinoviev and Kamenev, Lenin arranged for distribution of propaganda that encouraged the Russian soldiers to turn against their own commanders.

Nicholas II joined the fighting on the Eastern Front as supreme commander of the armed forces but did not make much impact. There were conscription riots in several cities by the end of 1915. However, the Russians re-launched their offensive under General Brusilov, who succeeded in capturing 200,000 prisoners and gaining 80 km of territory. The Germans responded quickly, and on receiving reinforcements, the German army forced the Russians to retreat. The offensive was ordered to halt in the autumn of 1916, by which time a million more casualties had been suffered. As supreme commander of the army, Nicholas II was closely linked to the army’s failures. There was a strong decline of support for the Tsar, and on March 15th, 1917, the Tsar abdicated.

The monarchy was replaced by a Provisional Government, headed by Prince Lvov. Lvov attempted to continue the war effort but was faced with widespread discontent and demands for peace by soldiers’ committees. Alexander Kerensky, the minister of war went to the Eastern Front to make speeches to the soldiers, encouraging them to keep fighting bravely. A new offensive was announced in June, under General Brusilov. Encouraged by the Bolsheviks, there were many demonstrations against Kerensky in Petrograd. The July Offensive was an attack on the Galician sector of Austria and was initially a success, with the capture of 10,000 soldiers. However, the Russian army was at an all time low morale and was poorly supplied. German reinforcements led to the end of the offensive. Soldiers on the Eastern Front heard the news and widespread mutinies took place, with about 2 million soldiers leaving the army unofficially. Kerensky became increasingly unpopular because of his continued support of the war effort.

The October Revolution of the Bolsheviks took place almost peacefully, with only six casualties on the day the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional Government. Kerensky fled to France, and his cabinet members were arrested by the Bolsheviks. The war had facilitated the overthrow of the monarchy. Lenin’s first steps were to pull Russia out of the war. This came at a high cost, however, as Russia had to surrender most of Ukraine, the southern Baltic states and the South of Finland under the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. The armistice was highly beneficial to the Germans, however, who now controlled a large chunk of Eastern Europe. The war was no more a two-front war, as fighting on the Eastern Front had ceased, and reinforcements could be sent to troops on the Western Front.

The Russian revolution was facilitated by the low morale induced by war-weariness, starvation of civilians, worker uprisings in factories, scandals involving the autocracy and Rasputin, and the ineffectiveness of Tsar Nicholas II and the Provisional Government. Wartime production demands had led to an increasing number of factory workers, many of whom were influenced by the Bolshevik propaganda. Agitators and activists received German support as the Germans hoped the Bolsheviks would pull Russia out of the war. The Russian military losses, on the other hand, were enormous and news of continued mutinies reached the civilians, who had been expecting a glorious early victory over the Germans. When strikes and food riots took place in Petrograd, the troops mutinied and joined the strikers. A large number of sailors also joined the strikes, playing a significant role in revolutionary events. Nicholas II refused to end the war effort as recommended by the Duma. Instead, he attempted to dissolve the Duma and respond to all uprisings with further violence. The Duma refused to disperse, however, and formed a provisional committee, causing Nicholas II to abdicate. Thus the war contributed to the Russian Revolution.